

## Institutional Accreditation Decision Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary

26.02.2019

**The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to accredit the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary for three years**

Acting in accordance with the authorisation granted by the clause 21 (3) 1) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and clause 10 (4) of the Universities Act and section 3.7.3 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) and based on section 48.5 of the 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation' compiled on the basis of the authorisation given in section 3.7.1 of the Statutes of EKKA, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter, "the Council") shall state the following:

1. The Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary (hereinafter, "BMTS") agreed with EKKA for the institutional accreditation to take place on 9.09.2017.
2. On 14.08.2018, the Director of EKKA approved by her order the following composition of the BMTS and Tartu Theological Seminary institutional accreditation and Theology study programme Group Assessment Committee (hereinafter, "the Committee")

<b>Gerrit Immink (Chair)</b>	Professor Emeritus, Protestant Theological University (the Netherlands)
<b>Jonathan Loose</b>	Director of Learning and Teaching, Heythrop College, University of London (UK)
<b>Trygve Elliv Wyller</b>	Professor, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo (Norway)
<b>Heiki Haljasorg</b>	Project manager, Estonian Council of Churches (Estonia)
<b>Ringo Ringvee</b>	Adviser, Ministry of the Interior (Estonia)
<b>Heidi Maiberg</b>	Student, University of Tartu (Estonia)

3. The BMTS submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 16.08.2017, and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 16.08.2018.
4. An assessment visit to the BMTS took place on 9 and 10.10.2018.

5. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 26.11.2018, and EKKA forwarded it to the Seminary for its comments on 30.11.2018 and the Seminary delivered its response on 12.12.2018.
6. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 17.12.2018. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the EKKA website.
7. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the Committee’s final assessment report along with the self-evaluation report to the Council members on 14.02.2019.
8. The component assessments by the Committee were as follows:

Organisational management and performance	Partially conforms to requirements
Learning and teaching	Conforms to requirements
Research, development and/or other creative activity	Partially conforms to requirements
Service to society	Partially conforms to requirements

9. The Council with 10 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 26.02.2019 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the BMTS.

#### 9.1. Organisational management and performance

##### Strengths

- 1) Teaching is carried out in three languages simultaneously. There is an open and ecumenical teaching environment.
- 2) The Seminary prepares clergy for leadership roles in churches and chaplaincy and improves the quality of the already working clergy.
- 3) Being part of the worldwide United Methodist Church (UMC) opens up opportunities for external funding.

##### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Meeting and maintaining the international standards of higher education is one of the main challenges for the Seminary. To guarantee that the national and international standards of higher education are met, BMTS must intensify and further develop its cooperation with other institutions of higher education in Estonia and abroad (incl the Asbury Theological Seminary). To ensure competitiveness at the international level, the Seminary should invest more in the international exchange of staff and strengthen research collaboration.
- 2) Decisions made informally at the Seminary are not always clearly documented, and information is distributed orally. The Seminary must develop the approach to its activities in such a way that they are more systematic, strategically planned and clearly documented.
- 3) The activities of the Seminary should be more strategically introduced in the Estonian society. The Seminary could strengthen its contribution to society by studying the social and cultural context of Estonia in relation to the Christian mission. It is advisable to build more solid links between the

Christian mission and the needs and developments of today's society. The existing alumni network could be used to build stronger connections between the Seminary and the secular world.

- 4) The Seminary has not defined its applied research profile. To provide quality teaching at the level of higher education, the Seminary should strengthen the research qualities of the staff. It is recommended to develop an applied research strategic plan that fits the mission of the Seminary. Funding must be ensured for planned research activities, and among others, it is recommended to apply for research funding from the Baltic-Nordic UMC and the CCTEF (Central Conference Theological Education Fund).
- 5) Student and staff participation in international mobility is low. A plan should be developed for the international exchange of staff and students.
- 6) The recruitment and training of academic staff is an important challenge for the Seminary. The salary level of academic staff is unsatisfactory in comparison with general salary levels in Estonia. The participation of academic staff in international projects and networks is crucial for the development of said staff.
- 7) According to students and alumni, the staff (especially those of the older generation) need to develop their e-learning skills.
- 8) The international network of the Methodist Church should be put into better use to ensure the financial sustainability of the Seminary in the future. The opportunities provided by the Church should be put into better use, above all for developing research.
- 9) The library of BMTS is limited. It is recommended to foster cooperation with the library of Tallinn University and begin creating an e-library.

## 9.2. Learning and teaching

### Strengths

- 1) Teachers and the leadership are dedicated to their students. Students are enthusiastic and satisfied with their study programmes.
- 2) The use of simultaneous interpretation is efficient and enables different language groups to be taught together and to discuss topics with each other. Interpreting equipment is of high quality, and interpreters are not only highly skilled in the appropriate languages but also qualified in theology.
- 3) BMTS provides a commendable level of support to students with special needs. Sign language interpreting is among the support tools used and caters to the needs of deaf students.
- 4) The Seminary is characterised by a caring ethos and is committed to providing strong informal support to its students.
- 5) The drop-out rate is low.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The Seminary must develop the approach to its learning and teaching activities in such a way that they are more systematic, strategically planned and clearly documented, for example, with respect to student support processes.
- 2) To ensure international competitiveness, it is recommended to enhance the applications process by providing a more rigorous evaluation of candidates' intellectual ability and their capacity to develop critical analysis and academic reflection skills.

- 3) Collaboration with the Asbury Theological Seminary and other schools should continue and be enhanced, and the academic standards of Asbury should be used regularly as a benchmark for those of BMTS.
- 4) There is little specialised literature available in Estonian and Russian. The availability of high-quality online learning resources differs depending on the language. Continuous effort must be made to present a comparable learning experience for students with different first languages, including when it comes to books and other learning resources. Since learning resources (literature, availability of supervisors) differ depending on the language of study, it is recommended that the differences are clearly stated in the curricula.
- 5) According to students' assessment, lectures are often limited to text being read off the paper, with a lack of group work and discussions. It is recommended to develop and enhance existing opportunities for regular academic staff development, including sharing of innovation and good practices among lecturers and engaging external experts.
- 6) It should be ensured that all academic staff are aware of what activities are mandatory for them as part of their roles. There needs to be verification that staff comply with these requirements (especially with regard to e-learning), being fully supported to do so.
- 7) In many cases, the dissertations submitted to the Committee lacked the theoretical foundation and depth expected at this level. Students' analytical and critical thinking skills need to be developed. To do so, the Committee recommends that the Seminary develop, document and implement a clear and realistic strategy for the development of staff research. This, in turn, would feed into a greater concern for methodology in student research and help enrich it.
- 8) International mobility of students should be continuously developed in partnership with institutions whose academic quality and standards would provide excellent benchmarks for BMTS. The Seminary should also create more opportunities for students to engage with research, such as provide opportunities to take part in conferences.
- 9) Academic staff have relatively unconstrained freedom to determine assessment tasks and criteria. This, however, can lead to inconsistency and lack of clarity in the assessment. It is important to create objective, transparent and coherent assessment criteria that comply with the level of higher education and consistently understood and applied by all academic staff. To ensure that assessment is objective, it is recommended to use the system of multiple markers.
- 10) Since on-campus study sessions only take place four days a month, the Seminary must ensure the availability of necessary learning resources for independent work, such as electronic versions of key readings and audio recordings of lectures.
- 11) It is important to ensure that the Student Information System becomes available in Russian as soon as possible.

### **9.3. Research, development and/or other creative activity**

#### **Strengths**

- 1) The plan of activities for 2016-2019 contains realistic ambitions in the field of research and development, which demonstrates that the Seminary is aware of the need to increase and intensify its research activity.
- 2) It is incredibly positive that the Seminary cooperates with different academic and church bodies regarding research topics and engagement of students. Students' dissertation topics are often linked to their practical activities in congregations and the needs of congregations.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The Seminary lacks a longer-term research plan. The Seminary should develop a longer-term research plan for the next 5-7 years. The content and methodology of applied research need to be more clearly defined. The Seminary must select areas of preference in research and allocate more resources to achieving specific output results.
- 2) According to the Estonian Research Information System (ETIS), very few members of academic staff have been published within the past five years (2014-2018). There have been 9 publications, 7 of which are written by the former rector of BMTS (most are ETIS level 6 publications). It is a clear weakness of the Seminary that so few faculty members publish. Professional publications and research output need to be an expected outcome for all faculty staff. To achieve more publications, the Seminary must secure the availability of sufficient research time and research resources for staff members.
- 3) The Seminary lacks a strategy (apart from verbal encouragement) to stimulate staff research. The Seminary could initiate a mentor system by bringing in excellent international Methodist scholars to supervise junior staff and co-author articles.
- 4) Only two members of the teaching staff hold a PhD. The leadership should encourage 1-2 more faculty members to pursue a PhD.
- 5) The documentation does not provide a clear distinction between a mentor and an academic supervisor. Leadership should clarify this in the context of planning further activities.

## 9.4. Service to society

### Strengths

- 1) Integration of different ethnic groups and creating possibilities for social coherence. The Seminary creates opportunities for graduates to work with different language groups.
- 2) The Seminary has promoted itself by organising Open Days and participated in the national youth information event 'Teeviit' (Signpost) to reach potential new students.
- 3) The Seminary has a positive impact on ecumenical work and interaction. Graduates work in different churches.
- 4) Efficient integration of the deaf into the professional work-life of churches and religious groups.
- 5) BMTS has offered young people who work with troubled children the chance to participate in their Inductive Bible Study introductory course.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The opportunities of social media are insufficiently used for advertising the activities of the Seminary. The Seminary should create a functioning system for popularising its core activities (for example, through a more active use of Facebook and other social media channels).
- 2) There are few activities aimed at the general public. The Seminary should have a systematic plan on how to map the needs of target groups and broaden the activities aimed at the general public.
- 3) The staff of BMTS has a modest level of participation in professional organisations. The Seminary staff should more actively participate in the activities of professional (theological) associations.

- 4) The Seminary has not clearly defined its objectives regarding in-service training. The objectives of the in-service training should be defined in the documents of BMTS. To fulfil the needs of target groups, more in-service training must be offered.
  - 5) The Seminary should evaluate the results of the in-service training activities periodically. A summary of the feedback given to in-service training courses should be made public.
  - 6) Employees are to be encouraged to write more articles, both scientific and popular scientific ones. All the articles, even the popular scientific ones, should be mentioned on the Estonian Research Information System (ETIS) website.
  - 7) Diploma theses could be uploaded to the Seminary's homepage to make student research accessible to interest groups.
  - 8) It should be indicated on the website of the Seminary that the library is also open to the public.
10. If three of the component assessments are “partially conforms to requirements” and none are “does not conform to requirements”, the Council shall assess that the leadership, organisational management, teaching and research activities and teaching and research environment have some issues, give instructions to eliminate them, and decide to accredit the higher education institution for three years.
11. The Council deemed it necessary to highlight the following issues:
- 1) Regarding organisational management and performance:
    - According to section 7.1.1.2 of the ‘Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation’ based on clause 10 (1) 1) and 4) of the Universities Act, subsections 21 (1) to (3) and (5) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and subsections 21 (1) to (3) and (5) of the Private Schools Act, *the development plan and the related action plans of a higher education institution shall arise from the concrete purposes that are built on its mission, vision and core values, and that consider the country’s priorities and society’s expectations.* The Seminary should have a systematic plan on how to map the needs of target groups. The Seminary could strengthen its contribution to the society by studying the social and cultural context of Estonia in relation to the Christian mission. The activities of the Seminary should be more strategically introduced in the Estonian society. A strategic plan for applied research that fits the mission of the Seminary shall be developed.
    - According to the section 7.1.2.5 of the regulation ‘Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation’, *employees shall participate in international mobility programmes, cooperation projects, networks, etc.* Academic staff and students have a modest level of participation in international mobility, and academic staff are not sufficiently active in international projects and networks. A plan should be developed for the international exchange of staff and students.
  - 2) Regarding learning and teaching:
    - Clause 6 (7) 2) of the Regulation of the Government of the Republic, ‘Standard of Higher Education’, prescribes that *a member of the teaching or research staff who conducts studies in a given subject must have the necessary teaching competence and his or her qualification must support achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme.* According to the section 7.2.4.4 of the regulation ‘Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation’, *modern technical and educational technology resources shall be used to organise educational activities.* According to students’ assessment, lectures are often limited to text being read off the paper, with a lack of group work and discussions. It is recommended to develop and enhance existing opportunities for regular academic staff development, including sharing of innovation and good practices among lecturers and engaging external experts.

- According to the section 7.2.3.2 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', *student assessment shall support learning and be in line with learning outcomes*. Academic staff have relatively unconstrained freedom to determine assessment tasks and criteria. This, however, can lead to inconsistency and lack of clarity in the assessment. It is important to create objective, clear and coherent assessment criteria that comply with the level of higher education and consistently understood and applied by all academic staff.
  - Clause 2.1 of Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education provides that *in order to be awarded a diploma of studies in professional higher education, a student shall be able to formulate problems relating to the field of study and to analyse and evaluate different solutions and be able to collect information independently by using appropriate methods and means, and to interpret it critically and creatively*. In many cases, the dissertations submitted to the Committee lacked the theoretical foundation and depth expected at this level. Students' analytical and critical thinking skills need to be developed. To do so, the Committee recommends that the Seminary develop, document and implement a clear and realistic strategy for the development of staff research.
- 3) Regarding research, development and/or other creative activity:
- According to the section 7.3.1.1 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', *a higher education institution shall define its RDC objectives and measure their implementation*. According to the section 7.3.2.2 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', *a higher education institution shall have financial resources needed for RDC development and a strategy that supports their acquisition*. The Seminary lacks a longer-term research plan. The Seminary should develop a longer-term research plan for the next 5-7 years. The content and methodology of applied research need to be more clearly defined. The Seminary must select areas of preference in research and allocate more resources to achieving specific output results.
  - According to the section 7.3.3.2 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', *professionalism, effectiveness and the workload of supervisors shall be reasonably balanced, which ensures the quality of research papers and positive graduation rates*. According to the Estonian Research Information System (ETIS), very few members of academic staff have been published within the past five years (2014-2018). It is a clear weakness of the Seminary that so few faculty members publish. Professional publications and research output need to be an expected outcome for all faculty staff. To achieve more publications, the Seminary must secure the availability of sufficient research time and research resources for staff members.
- 4) Regarding service to society:
- According to the section 7.4.1.1 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', *a higher education institution shall have a system for popularising its core activities*. Section 7.4.1.2 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation' provides that *employees of an institution of higher education shall participate in the activities of professional associations, and as experts, in other social supervisory boards and decision-making bodies*. There are few activities aimed at the general public. The Seminary should have a systematic plan on how to map the needs of target groups and broaden the activities aimed at the general public. The staff of BMTS has a modest level of participation in professional organisations. The Seminary staff should more actively participate in the activities of professional (theological) associations.
  - According to the section 7.4.2.1 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', *a higher education institution has defined its RDC objectives and measures their implementation*. The Seminary has not clearly defined its objectives regarding in-service training and does not evaluate the results of the in-service training activities periodically.

12. Based on the previous, the Council

**DECIDED**

**to accredit the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary for three years.**

The decision was adopted by ten votes in favour and 0 against.

13. The accreditation is valid until 26.02.2022. The EKKA Bureau shall agree the time of the next institutional accreditation with the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary by 26.02.2021, at the latest.
14. A person who finds that his or her rights have been violated or his or her freedoms restricted by this decision may file a challenge with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.

The Council shall forward the challenge to its Appeals Committee who shall provide an unbiased opinion in writing regarding the validity of the challenge to the Council, within five days after receipt of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the challenge within ten days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be investigated further, the deadline for its review by the Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days. A legal challenge to this decision is possible within 30 days after its delivery, by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court under the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

**Eve Eisenschmidt**  
**Chair of the Council**

**Hillar Bauman**  
**Secretary of the Council**